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Leland. Robert Burns. 1886

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**ROBERT BURNS;**

A

**BIRTHDAY ADDRESS,**

BY

**SAMUEL PHELPS LELAND**

**1886.**



ROBERT BURNS;

Birthday Address

ON THE

LIFE AND CHARACTER,

OF THE

Plowman Bard,

BY

SAMUEL PHELPS LELAND.

1886.

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*Friends of William Pickard*

*A “leafy June” spent on the banks of the “bonnie Doon” and amid the fields made immortal by Burns’ songs, and among a people rich with contentment, and the traditions of the bard, is the origin of the following. There may be nothing new in it, but I trust it will do the poet’s memory no ill.*

## ROBERT BURNS.

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ABOUT two miles south of the little city of Ayr, and so close beside the highway that there is no yard in front, is a little thatched-covered, clay cottage. It stands near "Alloway's old haunted kirk," and behind it the clear waters of the "bonnie Doon" ripple between grassy lawns, or in the shade of over-hanging trees. In this cottage, on the 25th day of January, 1759, was born the most strangely gifted child of genius that his age produced. His checkered life, in many respects, was a wonderful one. Few men were ever more praised and idolized than he. Few men of genius ever died more neglected and alone. And, after death, few men have ever risen higher in popular estimation, or attained a stronger hold on the hearts of their countrymen. The man of highest culture, and the peasant of humblest birth and surroundings, have alike enshrined him in their hearts. His countrymen love him. Wherever the English tongue is spoken, or men of British birth or descent are found, there are admirers of the plowman bard. And this admiration and affection are entirely exceptional. Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, have left the impress of their souls on the world for all time. But they are not *loved* like Robert Burns.

They have never been taken so closely to men's bosoms—they never can be.

The great man and the scholar, love Robert Burns because of his genius and his style. The poor man loves him because of his vigorous assertion of the nobility of manhood. The timid man loves him because the poet has enabled him to bear up more courageously under the proud man's contumely and the insolence of office. The patriot loves him because he has made him love his country more. The youthful lover, because he has voiced so exquisitely his sweetest and tenderest passion. The philanthropist, because his lines glow with sympathy for every living thing. Women love him because of the tenderness of his nature and his songs. Not a wounded hare goes by; not a mouse is turned up in her nest; not a mountain daisy is crushed by the plow-share, but his lines grow tearful with human feeling. In short all love him, with a love, doubtless, all the warmer because of *his* marred and imperfect life, and that he who imparted so much happiness to others, was himself so unhappy.

William Burns, the poet's father, was a very worthy and intelligent man. The poet says of him:

"He was thrown by early misfortunes on the world at large, where he suffered much, and picked up a pretty large quantity of observation and experience, for which I am indebted for most of my little

pretensions to wisdom. I have met few who understood men better than he. But stubborn, ungainly integrity, and headlong, ungovernable irascibility, are disqualifying circumstances, and I was, therefore, born a very poor man's son."

Early in life he went to Edinburgh and worked as a gardener, suffering many privations. Afterwards he migrated to Ayrshire, where he served one gentleman after another as gardener, until, in early summer of 1757, he leased seven acres of land near the Doon and on the land erected a little cottage. Into this in December following he took his young wife, Agnes Brown. She was the daughter of a Carrick farmer, and is described as a very sagacious and handsome woman, a loving mother and dutiful wife. The poet resembled her more than the father in his address and person. But from the father he inherited an irritable and melancholy temperament, which almost drove him to the verge of insanity, and forms, perhaps, an excuse for many of the excesses of his early life, and made his later years so miserable. In this clay cottage the poet was born. The night following his birth the wind blew out the only window in the house, and the mother being alone, was obliged to walk across the street, to the house of a neighbor, for refuge. This cold night, and the rude wind, seemed but a prophecy of his after years, for his whole life was, in his

own words, "frozen by the blast o' Janwaur win' that blew hansel in on him."

The first seven years of his life Robert spent in the cottage in which he was born. After he was six he attended a small school at Alloway Mill. The family then moved upon a small farm about three miles distant, where they lived nearly twelve years. The father, and some of the neighbors, for several years employed a man named Murdock to teach their children. They paid him a small quarterly salary, and lodged him alternately at their houses. This custom is still common in Scotland in sparsely settled districts. Robert was a great favorite of his teacher, and under him he acquired a good education in the common branches, with French, and some knowledge of Latin and Greek.

The land where they lived was poor, and finally, the father being unable to pay the rent, on the death of the *laird*, broke off the lease, and removed with his family to Lochlea, about twelve miles away, where he leased another farm. Here fortune smiled on them for four years. Then a misunderstanding with the landlord about the terms of the lease gave rise to a long lawsuit, the decision of which was against Burns. All his substance was swallowed up in the hungry vortex of litigation and his family reduced to want.

Often, very often, during the dreary years of their poverty, did the whole family spend an evening in tears over some threatening or abusive letter from the lord or factor. These things broke the good man's heart, and crushed his spirit, and

"Death, the poor man's dearest friend," came to his relief, and released him from farther war with an adverse and unfriendly world.

To the father's independence and manliness, and to his wise and Christian instruction, the son owed much. In the companionship of such a man many things can be learned not found in books nor taught in colleges. His home was a place of prayerful, restful peace. That father, and mother, and home, the poet has pictured in his "*Cotter's Saturday Night.*"

At the father's death the care of the large family came upon Robert and his brother Gilbert. And years of great struggle followed. It is a fearful thing to be poor and destitute of life's comforts anywhere; but doubly so, when with this destitution, comes absolute dependence. This, to a proud spirit is painful. This was a trying period of the poet's life. The necessity of work beyond his strength, the rigid economy practiced, and the insufficiency of food, stamped their influences on him, and, doubtless, intensified the tendency to melancholy and that

clamoring of strong passions and craving for drink that made his life so bitter.

During his boyhood he was known as a rhymer. Of course, these efforts were rude and incomplete. Most of them were inspired by some local event, and were given in manuscripts to his intimates. These, as a rule, had some ghostly reference; for with his melancholy temperament he delighted in such tales. Of this tendency he says:

“In my infant and boyish days, I owed much to an old woman who resided in the family, remarkable for her ignorance, credulity and superstition. She had, I suppose, the largest collection in the country of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, dead-lights, enchanted towers and other trumpery. This cultivated the latent seeds of poetry, but had so strong an effect upon my imagination, that to this hour, in my nocturnal rambles, I sometimes keep a sharp look-out in suspicious places; and though nobody can be more sceptical in such matters than I am, yet it often takes an effort of philosophy to shake off these idle terrors.”

And this tendency to revel in the strange and supernatural is shown in “Halloween,” “Address to the De’el,” and “Tam o’Shanter.”

The fire of love was kindled early in him. His love of the sex was always the absorbing passion of his nature. He was constantly under the influence of “dear, deluding woman, the joy of joys.” And despite all of his hardships she made

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his life one delicious dream. His first love was a lass with whom he worked in the harvest field, *a bonnie, sweet, sonsie lassie*, of whom, in his letter to Dr. Moore, he says:

"I did not then know why I liked to loiter behind with her, when returning in the evening from our labors; why the tones of her voice made my heart-strings thrill like an Aeolian harp; and particularly why my pulse beat such a furious ratan when I looked and fingered over her little hand to pick out the cruel nettle-stings and thistles. Among her other love-inspiring qualities she sang sweetly; and it was her favorite reel to which I attempted giving an embodied vehicle in rhyme. I was not so presumptuous as to imagine that I could make verses like printed ones, composed by men who had Greek and Latin. But my girl sang a song which was said to be composed by a small country laird's son, on one of his father's maids with whom he was in love; and I saw no reason why I might not rhyme as well as he. Thus began with me love and poetry."

It was to this girl that many of his poems were addressed.

In his nineteenth year he was sent to Kirkswald Parish School to study mensuration and surveying. He boarded with a maternal uncle, who resided in the neighborhood. This study qualified him for the office in the Excise which he afterwards held. The people here were mostly engaged in smuggling, and were rough in manners and morals. Here Robert became somewhat dissipated and formed loose associations unknown to him before. His school life, how-

ever, was short, and ended in a love affair. To get means to marry his love he went to Irvine, a small port town near Ayr, to learn flax dressing. During his stay here he lived chiefly on oat-meal sent to him from his home. His lady discarded him, and he plunged into dissipation, and lost the purity of soul, and freedom from personal taint, which had, with few exceptions, hitherto characterized him; and during a New Year's carousal with companions of loose morals, his shop took fire and burned, and he was on the world again.

For four or five years after this his life at Lochlea was one of hard toil upon the farm. His income was not more than seven pounds, or thirty-five dollars, a year. He read such books as he could obtain, and occasionally wrote verses. During this time he wrote "The Poet's Welcome to his Illegitimate Child." He was, for his transgression of the moral law, compelled to appear in the parish church on the stool of repentance. This seems to have been a turning point in his life. He lost caste with many good people that before had been his helpful friends. After this, he made many persons his intimate companions who could neither benefit him nor elevate him. He treated vice with so much levity, and apologized for his conduct with so much bravado and ease that he really convinced

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himself that vice was not so bad after all, and that virtue was overestimated. And in his after years how bitterly he reaped the harvest of this false philosophy!

About this time a debating club was formed, made up of the intellectual young men of the neighborhood. They met one night of each week, and their weekly expenses were limited to three pence. This was of great assistance to Burns. Soon after, he became connected with a lodge of Freemasons. He was from the first a leading spirit in the lodge. We may infer, however, that the same economy was not practiced there as in the club; for he says of the meetings—

“The clachan yill had made me canty—  
I was na fou, but just had plenty.”

Burns was very fascinating in conversation, and told a story with animation, but he could not sing. His voice was harsh and unmusical. This is very strange. Most poets sing well. This defect in Burns may have been the result of want of cultivation when young. Yet he enjoyed singing. It seems very contradictory that a poet, who, perhaps, more than any other, married music and verse, and who has written so much that is itself exquisite music, should have an ear so dull. Yet he had a keen sense of rhythm. He revised, with perfect melody, the national songs of his country, puri-

fying them, and making them more musical.

As before stated Burns' father died in February, 1784, in complete poverty, everything having been swallowed in his long litigation. The care of the family now fell on Robert and his brother, Gilbert. They leased a farm at Mossiel, in the parish of Mauchline. The first year poor seed, and the next season an excess of rain, destroyed the crops. The whole family often went to bed supperless, with little notion whence the food for the next day should come. However, this destitution and the discouraging failures made Robert recognize his powers as a poet. In one year here he produced most of the remarkable poems on which his fame will forever rest. Extreme feelings are necessary to poetry. True poetry is but the description of extreme feelings and passions with such power as to make the reader sympathize with them. Burns' poor health at this time; his adverse fortunes; his worse spirits; with hungry ruin threatening to destroy him; these goaded him to the brink of death. Poor man! How his poetic temperament suffered, and his proud spirit chafed, may be seen by his poems of that time.

Soon after he went to Mossiel a mutual love commenced its growth between him and Jean Armour, the

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handsome daughter of a respectable farmer of the neighborhood. It was not long before it became evident that Jean "had loved not wisely, but too well." To stop the scandal and do what he could of justice to the unfortunate girl, Burns gave her a written acknowledgement of a private marriage, which, under Scottish law entitled her to all the privileges of a wife. But, as the poet was poor, the girl's father compelled her to give back the paper in order to render the marriage void. Burns loved the girl intensely, and was driven almost to distraction by this treatment. In the hope of bettering his condition, so as to make the marriage possible, he engaged a place as a book-keeper on a plantation in Jamaica. To obtain money to pay his passage there he applied to a friend, Gavin Hamilton. He suggested that Burns publish his poems by subscription, and himself issued a circular therefor. About 350 copies were subscribed for, and one John Wilson, of Kilmarnock, undertook the publication.

While the book was being printed, and driven to madness by the conduct of the Armours, he renewed an intimacy he had formed with Mary Campbell—his famous "Highland Mary"—a beautiful girl then residing with a relative at the "Castle of Montgomery." It was arranged that they should marry and

that Mary should accompany him to the West Indies. Before going to her home in the Highlands to make preparations for her marriage, the lovers had a romantic meeting, one Sunday in June, on the beautiful banks of the Ayr. Burns, feeling so keenly the faithlessness of the Armours, and fearing a repetition, he desired to hem his engagement with Mary about with all the awful sanctions of religion. There was, and is, a superstition, among the peasants of Scotland, that vows made over running water can never be broken. Their adieus that day were made standing on each side of the Faile, a little purling brook which empties into the Ayr; and bathing their hands in the limpid waters, repeated their vows. The lovers exchanged Bibles. The one presented to Mary is now preserved in the monument at Alloway. It is in two volumes. On the blank leaf of one the poet wrote, "And ye shall not swear by My name falsely. I am the Lord." Levit. xix, 12. On the other he wrote, "Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths." Matt. v, 33.

The lovers never met again. Mary died of a fever at Greenock a few days after, but her sweet love he always cherished. The friends of the poet have erected an unpretending monument above her grave in the little kirk yard at Greenock.

Burns never forgot her dear image. Long after he married Jean he kept the anniversaries of their parting. The third anniversary came. The previous night he spent in uncommon sadness, walking restlessly about the yard. Towards morning, in apparent exhaustion, he threw himself upon the ground under a hay-rick, and groaned in unutterable agony and sorrow. At daybreak his wife and some friends induced him to go into the house. Upon entering his room, without uttering a word, he took his pen and wrote that exquisite composition, "*To Mary in Heaven*,"—one of the noblest and most finished in our speech :

"Thou ling'ring star, with less'ning ray,  
That loves to greet the early morn,  
Again thou usherest in the day  
My Mary from my soul was torn.  
O Mary! dear departed shade!  
Where is thy place of blissful rest?  
See'st thou thy lover lowly laid?  
Hear'st thou the groans that rend his  
breast?

That sacred hour can I forget?  
Can I forget the hallow'd grove  
Where by the winding Ayr we met  
To live one day of parting love?  
Eternity will not efface  
Those records dear of transports past;  
Thy image at our last embrace;  
Ah! little thought we 'twas our last!

Ayr, gurgling, kissed his pebbled shore,  
O'erhung with wild woods thick'ning  
green;  
The fragrant birch, the hawthorn hoar,  
Twined amorous round the raptured  
scene;

The flowers sprang wanton to be prest,  
The birds sang love on every spray—  
Till soon, too soon, the glowing west  
Proclaimed the speed of winged day.

Still o'er those scenes my memory wakes,  
And fondly broods with miser care;  
Time but the impression stronger makes,  
As streams their channels deeper wear.  
My Mary! dear departed shade!  
Where is thy place of blissful rest?  
See'st thou thy lover lowly laid?  
Hear'st thou the groans that rend his  
breast?"

When it was known that Burns contemplated going to Jamaica, it was rumored that old Armour was about to commence a prosecution against him for maintenance of the expected offspring. Burns was unable to procure the caution money, and fearing the jail, removed clandestinely to the obscure house of a relative near Kilmarnock, taking with him his chest, containing all of his earthly possessions. Here he was near the press, where he could read proofs of his book. Here, too, he kept a sharp look-out for the officers of the law, and lived in a state of such harrowing fear, that he always looked upon this period of his life with pain. Indeed, it *was* painful for a man so gifted and proud spirited, to be hiding about in hedge and copse to avoid a legal process and dodge the jail officers. It turned out at length that Armour had commenced no action and that all of the poet's misery and terror had been groundless.

Amid these circumstances the book passed through the press, and at the end of July, 1786, about six hundred copies of this wonderful volume saw the light. Burns offered to sell the book while in press for five pounds, but no one dared accept it. Milton, it is said, sold the first edition of his "Paradise Lost" for ten pounds. What little conception either poet had of his wondrous work! Men often build wiser than they know. As has been stated, about 350 copies of the book had been subscribed for. The balance of the edition were sold in a few weeks. The ear of the world was charmed. Men and women were wild in their enthusiasm. New editions were demanded, and followed each other in close succession. The books were sold by thousands. No man, with one stride, ever stepped so high. No book, probably, was ever given to the world that received, at once, so much warmth of praise. Plow-boys and maid-servants took the money they needed for bread and clothes and bought his books. Old and young, high and low, ignorant and educated, were alike delighted and transported. His songs were sung in schools, in theaters, in parlors, in workshops, in fields, and in the streets. The books were found on the rude table of every peasant's cot; on the desks of merchants; in the studies of ministers; and the center-tables of the rich. His songs

entered into the speech of Scotland, and became a part of its very life. They went to the *heart* of all classes, and have, until this day, been cherished there. We do not wonder at their popularity. "The Cotter's Saturday Night," "A Man's a Man for a' that," and those tender touches of domestic life, and those sentiments so grandly spoken, that elevate labor and enoble manhood and womanhood—they can never die. So long as proud wealth shall oppress; so long as honest toil shall groan; so long as human hearts shall love, so long shall these poems live.

Burns abandoned his Jamaica plan, and, accepting an invitation, went to Edinburgh, where he was introduced into the first society. Here he was petted, praised and lionized. He became at once intimate with men whose fame was world-wide, and whose praise was on every tongue. He was looked upon by the common people as a prodigy. Windows were filled with anxious faces as he passed along the streets. He was nightly invited to parties with the most aristocratic ladies and gentlemen. He was feted, flattered, courted, loved. And what is surprising, amid all this the poet kept his head. He was neither dazzled nor bewildered. And from it all he turned with gladness to his farm home and his rustic friends.

While in Edinburgh the authorized second edition of his book was

published. For this edition he was paid three thousand dollars, a sum greater than any author had before been paid. To this edition he added a few poems, among them, "Death and Dr. Hornbook," "The Ordination," "The Twa' Brigs of Ayr," "The Unco Guid," "Address to Edinburgh," and a few others. "Holy Willie's Prayer," and "Address to the De'el," that were written in the midst of a bitter theological controversy that agitated all Scotland, and which, from some sources brought on him censure, were retained in this edition, and added greatly to his fame. Two thousand eight hundred copies of this edition were sold in a single week.

Burns was famous. No man could stand higher. The common people loved, worshiped him; the educated admired him, and felt no pang of jealousy. But from this high station in popular favor he fell. The causes that led to that fall were partly within himself, and partly without, born of the troubled and singular times in which he lived. By some writers justice has not been done him, by over-looking these outward circumstances. By others he has been over-praised, by laying upon these outward influences too much stress. The simple story of this period of his brief life, will, perhaps, be the best apology for him, if, indeed, apology were sought.

The poet turned from the most

celebrated beauties in Edinburgh to his Mauchline lassie. He found the Armours only too well pleased to receive him now. He was happy, and, as was the custom of his time, resorted to the cup to prove his happiness. His money seemed exhaustless to him. He gave his brother, Gilbert, several hundred dollars, to be used to keep the family together, and "give them a decent living." He then went on a tour to the Highlands and spent many weeks in dissipation and rowdyish sports, with unworthy companions, proud of his society, and willing to accept his favors. He returned, and married Jean Armour; and, not many months after, he rented a farm and took up his residence at Ellisland—a place made famous by William Wallace. Here he was blessed, as he said, in due time, "by another addition in the form of twins again." This home, on the banks of the Nith, was a poetic one. About this time he was appointed to the Excise, at a salary of fifty pounds a year. His district comprehended ten parishes. This kept him from home most of the time. He was not a good financier. Ellisland was eating up the profits on his books, as well as his salary. He was among jolly companions all the time. This increased his expenses largely. He applied for promotion. In the winter 1791, he was given an appointment at Dumfries, at seventy pounds a year. This was

better, for he could be at home all the time and was not obliged to keep a horse. The change, however, from the freedom of the country, to a small house, in the smoky town, did not act favorably upon him. All agreed that from this time his moral course was downward. The causes leading to this may easily be seen.

Two classes made up the principal society of Dumfries: One a class of men, in easy circumstances, mostly retired from active business, who took their noon-day dram, and their four o'clock toddies, with a tumbler or two to follow. They were not drunkards, by the definition of their time, but were known as soakers, tiplers, their breath never free from the smell of whiskey. The other class was composed of young doctors, lawyers, clerks, merchants, &c., who were busy during the day, but indulged in sprightly potations in the evening. By both of these classes Burns was eagerly welcomed. His genius, his renown, his brilliancy of conversation, made him a desirable companion, and his friends were lavish in his entertainment. The result was he was "unco' fo'" every night. The habit grew upon him. It brought with it all of its demoralizing influences. He became more coarse and vulgar in jokes and stories and sallies of wit, and more abandoned to his appetite. He might have borne up under the potations of either class; but to keep

up with the one during the day, and fresh companions during the evening, sent him drunk nightly to his bed. And he did not have the power to resist. His fame, his genius, and his weakness conspired to ruin him. And they did. The change to him was great. His sudden elevation, the eagerness with which his company was sought by all, the habits that included drinking in hospitality and politeness, the comparative idleness after a life of unceasing toil, these overcame him.

That Burns' indulgences, prior to his going to Dumfries, were only occasional, is clearly shown. His income at Lochlea and Mossiel never exceeded thirty-five dollars a year. Out of this he clothed himself respectably, bought books, helped his family, and owed no man. From this he could have bought little drink. Nor was he a lounger about the public-houses, waiting to be treated. He was too proud for this.

None knew his failings and his weaknesses better than he. He seeks no excuse but entreats us—

“To gently scan our fellow man,  
To step aside is human.”

And truly says—

“Who made the heart, 'tis He alone  
Decidedly can try us.”

And relegates to God the just estimate of human endeavor—

“What's done we partly may compute  
But never what's resisted.”

Another, and the main, cause that led to this change of the "fickle public's estimate," was one too frequently overlooked. It was a political one. Burns' manhood was spent in an exciting period of English history. War and revolutions were common. Liberty was struggling for recognition in America and in France. Kings on every throne of Europe trembled. The War of Independence in America was scarcely ended, when the mutterings of discontent in France, gave that country the Revolution of 1789. The position of the unfortunate Louis awakened alarm among dynasties everywhere. The British government and its functionaries of every class, were watchful, to prevent the spread of the dangerous philosophy that threatened Louis.

Naturally, Burns sympathized with struggling Freedom everywhere. In the expression of this sympathy he was often indiscreet. His prominence, and his position as an officer of the English government, caused him to be constantly watched. He was, in a sentimental way, a Jacobite. He shared this sentiment in common with many of the most intelligent and prominent of his countrymen. The haughtiness of his spirit, and his sense of independence, would not suffer him to disguise his convictions. And to express them, at this time, was dangerous. At any time of great excitement and alarm, un-

principled informers are always busy. They are too often encouraged and rewarded. High-minded and honorable men, in the interest of the government, often become intollerant and merciless. So it was then. These men, high and low, alike, seemed to regard it as a duty to suppress all liberal sentiments, in the interest of the sovereign. And in their zeal they respected no name. They honored no greatness.

The poet, by some indiscreet verses he had written on a window pane at Sterling, had excited suspicion, and turned all eyes upon him. Dumfries, where he lived, was a Tory town; and political feeling ran high, and was intollerant. Burns was a Whig, and a very enthusiastic one. His opinions were called in question. Officers were appointed to investigate charges against him. This wounded his sensitive heart to madness. By the earnest interference of a personal friend, in the government, he was permitted to continue in office. All hope of promotion was, however, abandoned. The government set spies for him. They watched every utterance and movement. In so small a town he could but know this. His proud spirit could ill brook their insolence. He was irritated. The consciousness that his words and acts were watched, provoked him into the utterance of many hot things. These were reported to his superiors. A few facts

may profitably be given to illustrate this.

Entering, one night, the theater at Dumfries, he refused to uncover while the National Anthem was being played. A call was made for his expulsion. He was obstinate; but finally, in the confusion, either took off his hat, or some one tore it from his head. At another time, at a private dinner party, he refused to drink to the health of Pitt, but proposed, instead, the health of Washington, "the champion of Liberty in America." This was most ill-advised. It was the universal custom to toast the great officers of the government at all meetings, and by men of every political opinion. It was an obstinate assertion of his Republicanism in the face of a custom, the compliance with which would have been no compromise. At another time, being called upon to propose a toast, gave in an ironical tone and manner: "*May our success in the present war be equal to the justice of our cause.*" An officer in the army, being present, took exceptions to this, and a disgraceful quarrel ensued, which resulted, as was usual in such cases then, in a challenge for a duel. The next morning Burns wrote a letter to his host, in part apologizing, and in part defending, his toast and pleading his drunkenness. It is sad to read this abject letter, begging off from the duel on account of his wife and children, and

pleading that the story might be suppressed, as its publication might bring him under censure to his superiors. Nothing is farther heard of it between the parties, so, presumably, his excuse of drunkenness was accepted. But to the government the whole transaction was reported.

These show his sentiments; but another fact may be given to show his conduct. The Solway Firth, from its nearness to the Isle of Man, was much frequented by smuggling craft; and on its shores dwelt a race of daring and unscrupulous smugglers. The true condition there at this time is well pictured by Sir Walter Scott in "Redgauntlet." In February, 1792, a suspicious craft was discovered in the Firth, and Burns, with others, was set to watch her movements. The next day she stranded. Her crew was numerous, and promised a bloody resistance. Officers were sent for troops. On their arrival, Burns, sword in hand, was the first to board the ship. In the presence of the troops the crew yielded without a struggle. The vessel and cargo were sold at Dumfries. Burns bought four carronades. These, with a long letter of sympathy, he sent to the French Convention. The guns and letter were stopped at Dover. The disclosure awakened a profound feeling everywhere adverse to Burns. He was an officer of the government. He was giving sympathy and furnish-



ing material of war to his country's enemy. The letter shows that this was done deliberately. Probably any man less loved would have been thrown into prison or hanged.

These are the principal causes that led to Burns' unpopularity in late life. These acts and speeches were reported to the officials. His superiors cautioned him to be *silent* and *obedient*. They told him that the duty of an officer was to *act* and not to *think*. But he would not heed their admonitions. He put himself into ostracism. Tories kept aloof from him. God-fearing people abandoned him. Timid people turned from him, in the fear that if they associated with him they, too, might be thought disloyal. He was shunned by all. He tried to keep up courage.

“Who does me disdain  
I will scorn them again,”

he wrote. But even this small revenge did not satisfy him. He must have sympathy. He longed for companionship. The cold distance, the averted looks, gave him exquisite misery. His books, that had sold so rapidly, were now taken from the shelves. None dared buy them. They were taken from the tables and “dressers” in every home, the owners fearing that their presence might put them under suspicion. He felt all this keenly, bitterly. His heart was broken. And yet, under this strong pressure he wrote many

of his most exquisite songs. Poetry and tears were the safety-valves that let off his pressure of sorrow. Thus the slow months went by. His health failed constantly, until one July morning his world-weary soul passed away. He went broken-hearted to the grave before he was thirty-eight years old.

A gloom overspread Dumfries and the parish when it was known the great poet was dying. The streets were thronged with anxious persons eager to know about their illustrious townsman. All differences were forgotten. The good in him was only thought of then. It was enough for all that the greatest living Scotchman was dying. Tearful eyes looked into tearful eyes, and moist lips whispered "is he dead?" No loud word was spoken. Business was forgotten. Shops and stores remained unopened, though the day wore on toward noon. No carts were in the streets. The markets were neglected. There were four helpless boys soon to be orphans; and there was a devoted wife, about to become a mother, on her bed in an adjoining room. A large crowd gathered around the little house. Friends filled it. The farewell was given, and his tired soul passed to the Infinite. A cloud of gloomy sorrow fell on the land that day. Eyes of strong men that had not wept for years were wet then.

The body was laid out for burial



in a plain coffin. It was covered with flowers. It was tenderly watched. The next evening the body was removed to the town hall, where thousands looked with tearful eyes on the sad, sad face, that could not smile again. The next day he was buried, with military honors. Two regiments, one of infantry and one of cavalry, lined the street from the town hall to the grave, almost a mile in distance. It was estimated that, beside the soldiers, there were twenty thousand persons present. And there were none but heavy hearts there. Shots were fired above his grave. The green sods were replaced, and the sad concourse turned away. And while the people wept the widow was in the pangs of child-birth.

And such is too often the fickle estimate of common men. The poet's last days were made bitter by the world's cold frown and scorn. But before the green sods had been placed above his grave a wild shout of praise went up everywhere. Some one has said that the "niggardly world gave him a stone when he asked for bread." It sent him broken-hearted to the grave. But when too late to bless his life the same world gave him glory. Scarcely was he dead when his books were again put upon the market, and sold by thousands. The voluntary contributions of admirers made a pension for his family. His name was

on every tongue, and his words made part of the speech of his countrymen. Men builded monuments to his memory. His ashes lie beneath a splendid mausoleum at Dumfries, and beside them sleeps the world-weary Jean in her eternal quiet. Overlooking the "banks and braes" of bonnie Doon stands a magnificent monument, in the midst of a garden of beauty. Another graces Calton Hill at Edinburgh. And everywhere on Scotia's heather-crowned hills, and in her fertile valleys, in town and country, may be seen tokens of his country's love for him who made the flowers and sunshine, song and music. Pilgrims from every land visit his humble birth-place. Thousands of people walk yearly through the fields his peasant songs have made immortal. They sit beneath the birchen boughs on the banks of "bonnie Doon"; and dream in the weird enchantment of Alloway's "auld haunted kirk." And visions, like Longfellow's, come in their dreams:

"I see, amid the fields of Ayr,  
A plowman, who in foul and fair,  
    Sings at his task,  
So clear, we know not if it is  
The laverock's song we hear, or his,  
    Nor care to ask.

"Touched by his hand the way-side weed  
Becomes a flower; the lowliest reed  
    Beside the stream  
Is clothed with beauty; gorse and grass  
And heather, where his footsteps pass  
    The brighter seem.

"He sings of love, whose flame illumines  
The darkness of lone cottage rooms;  
    He feels the force—  
The treacherous under-tow and stress  
Of wayward passions, and no less  
    The keen remorse.

"But still the burden of his song  
Is love of right, disdain of wrong;  
    Its master-chords  
Are Manhood, Freedom, Brotherhood,  
Its discords but an interlude  
    Between the words.

"And now he haunts his native land  
As an immortal youth; his hand  
    Guides every plow;  
He sits beside each ingle-nook  
His voice is in each rushing brook,  
    Each rustling bough."

Of Burns' writings little need be said. A criticism of their merits and demerits, is not within the present design. That his poems are not always free from coarseness is true. But few of these were, however, included in the editions which he published. Most of them were written for the amusement of his friends, with no thought of their preservation. But after his death, every line he had ever written was eagerly collected and published, without regard to his good name or memory. It is not strange, therefore, considering the times in which he lived, when quite a different standard of modesty in literature from ours, was recognized, that many of these fugitive rhymes should contain offensive allusions. But when we consider the purifying influence he exerted

upon the songs of his countrymen, we can easily pardon these small offenses. He found the lyric poetry of Scotland so impure, that but for his regeneration of it it would have long since been forgotten. He breathed into it his own soul, and made it immortal. And in this lies the surest foundation of his fame.







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